

Little Elves keep magic of Christmas alive

Jarmila Dokladalova

"For me the *Little Elves* are a kind of magic," confides Sylvain Duhamel, founder and organizer of the all volunteer service organization *Les P'tits Lutins* (Little Elves). "I ask volunteers not to give their names, only their first name if they want, but when we visit, and people ask who is the gift form, we say 'from the little elves,' because I want to keep the magic of Christmas alive."

This year, The *Little Elves*, raised \$8,500 that went towards holiday gifts for people with AIDS and HIV who have neither the support of family nor friends and live in public or charity homes or use their services. The project started out as a personal one when Sylvain's brother died of AIDS in 1991. Although his brother did have the support of family in his ordeal, it made Sylvain realize how much more difficult the harrowing experience must be for those without family and

friends. "I really wanted to do something to help, but I was having a hard time being a volunteer going to people's homes," he explains. "That was too much for me, so I got gifts and distributed them to homes (providing housing for people with AIDS) in Montreal."

He continued the endeavor for six years solo and did not even mention it to anyone. Finally, a talk with his sister in 1997 convinced him to get others involved. In a short time the Elf Staff grew to seventeen.

This year, their ranks have grown to over one hundred, still all volunteer, distributing gifts to homes throughout Montreal and Quebec and shipping them elsewhere in Canada, including to BRAS and Bruce House in the Ottawa/Outaouais area. The Elves even came upon a shelter in Whitehorse in the Yukon. "Shipping is expensive," concedes Sylvain looking at the \$700 Canada Post price tag, "but sometimes that is the only way we can get the gifts there. We do prefer a personal

approach, so when we have a contact in another city, we ship it to that person and he drops it off at the home."

Although originally the *Little Elves* focused on delivering goods to residential homes and sought to confine their activity to Christmas Eve, they have recently made earlier visits for drop-in clients. "Our goal was to provide gifts for people in residence, but it is changing because of budget cuts. We also want to reach those in need and using numerous community support programs and day drop-ins."

In 2002, the *Little Elves* had two other milestones: They incorporated as a registered charity, and the *Little Elves* set up shop in Paris with a sister - or brother organization - bringing the same holiday cheer to France.

If you would like to join the army of Little Elves, or make a donation to help them continue their work, contact them at www.ptitslutins.org.



The Little Elves hard at work on Christmas eve. Photo by The Little Elves